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AUTHOR Payne, Charles M.
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ABSTRACT

Few of the current major efforts to improve urban schools adequately appreciate the extent to which the problematic social climate of urban schools can undermine the implementation of even very good ideas. As a result, programs often come and go with little lasting impact. This paper uses ethnographic fieldwork to illustrate the ways dysfunctional relationships among teachers, parents, and administrators interfere with the actual implementation of reform programs even when all parties are substantially in agreement about goals and means. Data are from 16 elementary schools in Chicago (Illinois) that are trying to implement the Comer process of school reform (J. Comer, 1980 and later). The operating assumptions underlying several current reform efforts are contrasted with the day-to-day realities of schools. (Contains 54 references.) (Author/SLD)

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"I Don't Want Your Nasty Pot of Gold:" Urban School Climate and Public Policy

by

Charles M. Payne
Department of African-American Studies
308 Kresge Hall
Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois 60208

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"I Don't Want Your Nasty Pot of Gold": Urban School Climate Revisited

Abstract

Few of the current major efforts to improve urban schools adequately appreciate the extent to which the problematic social climate of urban schools can undermine the implementation of even very good ideas. Thus, program after program comes and goes with little lasting impact. This paper uses ethnographic fieldwork to illustrate the ways dysfunctional relationships among teachers, parents and administrators can interfere with the actual implementation of reform programs, even when all parties are substantially in agreement about goals and means. The operating assumptions underlying several current reform efforts are contrasted with the day-to-day realities of schools.

"I Don't Want Your Nasty Pot of Gold:"

Urban School Climate and Public Policy

Seems a stranger strolled into an urban school one day and asked if he could address the teachers. When they were gathered, he held up a big, shiny pot of gold and announced that it belonged to the school, he had brought it as a gift. The teachers, especially the veteran teachers, immediately started firing hostile questions at him. How come he was being so nice to them? And who was going to divide the gold up? Did the union approve of bringing gold into schools? Besides, some of them had heard he had already given a pot of gold to the school down the street. Was this pot of gold as large as the pot of gold he gave the school down the street?, because if not, they didn't want it. They didn't need any second-rate pot of gold, thank you very much. One stern matron rose to her feet, shaking a finger at the befuddled stranger, to testify that she had been teaching for thirty-five years and if you needed gold to teach she sure would have figured it out before now and anyhow, she knew the students and parents in this neighborhood, which was more than she could say for the stranger, and they just weren't the kind of parents and kids who could appreciate gold. Maybe gold made a difference in other neighborhoods but it wasn't going to do a bit of good here. [1]

Traditionally, the social sciences have prided and defined themselves on the discovery of new knowledge. That may be another case of occupational self-delusion. If we consider the

problem from the viewpoint of attempts to improve urban schools over the past couple of decades, one could make a case that we have too much knowledge right now, we are so awash in information that it has become paralyzing. Instead of more information, the critical need for educators and policymakers may be learning to appreciate the information they already have.

The pot of gold story reflects an aspect of life in inner city schools that is well-known but badly appreciated. In the worst such schools, the social infrastructure has been so damaged by mutual suspicion, low expectations, factionalization of staff and general pessimism as to make most school reform efforts irrelevant. Some of the problem is captured by the phrase "micropolitics of the school" (Ball 1987) but that phrase doesn't clearly suggest the seemingly irrational relationships which characterize many urban schools. People who have been involved in efforts to change schools recognize the pot of gold scenario, with its predisposition to suspicion, its low expectations of students and parents and its rejection of anything that comes from the world outside. It is a pattern which means, in its strongest form, that schools cannot build on whatever real strengths they have, cannot make use of resources -- including financial resources and technical expertise -- even if somehow they could be provided. It is a pattern in which the irrational component of behavior can be sufficiently large as to blunt the effectiveness of either positive or negative sanctions.

We have three decades of work in (or close to) the ethnographic tradition (Kohl, 1967; Kozol, 1967; Leacock, 1969; Rogers, 1969; Rosenfeld, 1971; Gouldner, 1978; Simon, 1982; Rogers, 1983; Payne, 1984; Fine, 1991; Anyon, 1995) testifying to the potency of dysfunctional relationships in urban schools. With due allowance for substantial variation in what inner city schools are like, the overall portrait that emerges is one of demoralized institutions, alienating

for staff and students alike, in which students, parents, administrators and teachers come to expect little of one another and are often unable to elicit more than minimal cooperation from one another. This is more a matter of the culture of the institutions than of the characteristics of individuals. Even young teachers who start off with a high regard for the potential of inner-city students are socialized by the environment to expect failure (Fuchs, 1969; Rosenfeld, 1971). This sense of futility is deeply ingrained, well beneath the level of the rational, so that even witnessing successful efforts at the level of individual classrooms or schools (Kohl, 1967; Rogers, 1969; Rosenfeld, 1971; Gouldner, 1978; Payne, 1984;) or even at the level of subdistricts (Meier, 1991) is unlikely to make inner-city teachers question the basic doctrines of the ineducability of inner-city students and the apathy of their parents. The sense of futility also expresses itself in a tendency to reject new initiatives almost out of hand. Teachers like to say they've seen programs come and they've seen them go. Older teachers are especially likely to react this way (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978). There is good reason to believe that if a positive school climate can be developed, it can make a major difference in the academic and social development of students (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston, 1979; Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore, 1982; Anderson 1982, Byrk and Lee, 1992; Lee and Smith, 1996) but "To create a positive and productive school climate where one does not exist, requires a sustained school improvement process...This requires time and steady support, often over a period of years (Boyd, 1989)."

Nationally, some parts of the education reform community are now very much attuned to these problems, including the charter school/ small school movement and the Comer project. Other reform groups and what I take to be the bulk of the policymaking establishment continue

to proceed as though if only we could change school governance procedures or pedagogical practice or some such structural arrangement, we could turn all of these schools around. Policy gets legislated, grand programs get designed without any discernible thought about what it means to try to actually implement all the pretty plans in demoralized schools. Much of the contentious debate over how we should reform urban schools has an Alice-in-Wonderland quality to it. We are having death struggles over the value of this vision of reform as against that vision of reform -- whole language versus phonics instruction, the Comer project versus accelerated schools, Total Quality Management versus Success For All. The truth is that, in practice, in too many schools no choice is likely to cut deeply enough into the thicket of human relationship problems to make a difference. The rest of this essay will, first, draw on some research in Chicago schools to illustrate the salience of those relationship problems for reform initiatives and, secondly, discuss some recent reform efforts, some national, some drawn from Chicago, which suggest how little policymakers are attending to those problems.

Since 1991, I have been a part of an ethnographic study of the Chicago implementation of the Comer process of school reform, trying to understand what facilitates or impedes its development. First established in New Haven in 1968, the Comer process -- formally, the School Development Process -- tries to change schools by improving working relationships among school staff. (Boyd, 1989; Comer, 1980; Haynes and Comer, 1993; Comer, Haynes, Joyner and Ben-Avie, 1996) The most important element in the implementation process is probably the Comer facilitator, the person at the building level charged with keeping certain the project stays on course. For this essay, the Comer program in itself is less important than the

fact that its components reflect some of the strategies which have been most popular in school reform efforts over at least the last decade -- shared decision-making, greater parent/community involvement, more collaboration among stakeholders, more sharply focused services to individual students.

The Chicago implementation of Comer is distinctive in some respects, including the fact that Chicago schools have been engaged since 1989 in a massive, precedent-setting effort to devolve power down to the local school level (Mirel, 1993; Ayers and Klonsky, 1994). Each of the city's 540 or so schools is now governed by a Local School Council (LSC), whose powers include hiring and firing the principal. A majority of LSC members are parents but teachers and the "community" are also represented. This radical departure from business as usual has led to a remarkable period of educational experimentation across the city, making it possible for programs like Comer's to go into schools which would have been closed to outsiders a few years ago.

My work with the project has involved leading the ethnographic team, documenting the change process gathering data through direct observation and interviews. Sixteen Chicago elementary schools have tried to implement the process and we have data on all of them, including one I will call Woodbine School.[2] Among the Chicago Comer schools, Woodbine is very much in the middle of the pack in most aspects. Serving an overwhelmingly low-income, Black and Hispanic population on the city's West Side, it has an engaged, energetic principal, who is capable of accepting some criticism -- an important issue for a principal involved in a change process -- and a hardworking staff. While many Chicago schools are virtually empty of staff soon after the afternoon bell, Woodbine has several teachers who

regularly come early and stay late, suggesting a staff that has higher expectations for their students than is normal in inner city Chicago. Its student population is low-income and at least two well-known street gangs operate in the area but this is not a school serving one of Chicago's housing projects with all the additional social problems that entails.

Even with its relative advantages, Woodbine is a school where the staff has significant problems trusting one another, some of which start with problems on the leadership team but emanate out to complicate relationships throughout the building. Mrs. Clinton, the principal, is very concerned with test scores but like most Chicago principals, would be considered more of a manager than an instructional leader. Her classroom observations -- which are not frequent -- seem geared toward identifying the weaker teachers so that she can weed them out, not to working with them on their weaknesses. She has hired some assistant principals, though, who are more respected by staff for their knowledge of instruction, something not all principals are secure enough to do. The principal's operating style, though, makes it difficult for her to get the best out of her staff. She is described as impetuous, much quicker to reprimand -- often in public -- than to praise. The principal is not very patient with the frequent criticisms of insensitivity to staff; she hires people because she hopes they are professional enough to do their jobs without being stroked every few minutes. Despite the fact that the school is committed to shared decision-making, Mrs. Clinton has difficulty making her staff, even the senior staff, feel that they have real voice. She vacillates between asking for collaboration and consensus one day and expecting staff to respect her decision-making prerogatives as principal the next. Her vacillation keeps senior staff constantly off balance. Is this a day when it is OK to disagree with the boss or not?

Guess wrong and you can wind up in big trouble. At one point, the principal decided that she wanted to reshuffle job assignments of the members of the leadership team (the assistant principals, the counselor, the social worker, the curriculum resource specialist) in ways that, from her viewpoint, would allow for more effective curriculum supervision and more support for teachers on disciplinary matters. From the viewpoint of almost everybody else, it looked like the reassignments failed to take advantage of the particular strengths and weaknesses of team members. Mrs. Clinton originally presented the decision as a done deal but when she saw how clearly shocked they were at not being consulted sooner, she claimed she was only making suggestions, after all, but she had presented the realignment so forcefully that no one really believed that it was open for discussion. Few objections were voiced until she stepped out of the room and the Comer facilitator pressed people for their reactions, which turned out to be almost entirely negative. Mrs. Clinton was clearly annoyed to walk back in the room and find the issue still under discussion. According to the field notes she "sighed and in a combative tone asked the group, "What is the problem ? Is there someone here who is unable to do what I have asked them to do?" When Mrs. Johnson, one of the assistant principals, expressed her doubts about the new plan, Mrs. Clinton repeatedly asked her if she was saying she could not accomplish what he had asked her to do and she repeatedly responded that she was 'perfectly willing' to do her 'very best' but she still had concerns. After going back and forth for awhile, Clinton pushed her chair back from the table and said, angrily , "This is an administrative decision and I am the administrator. This is no longer up for discussion. As far as I am concerned, this meeting is adjourned." With that, she stormed out.

The observable fallout from this little brouhaha continued for months. In the short term,

Mrs. Johnson, was frightened, almost to tears at one point, that for voicing an honest opinion, she was going to get written up. Mrs. Clinton was certainly in a mood to do that for awhile. She felt betrayed -- that was her word -- by her assistant. This was not the first time that Clinton thought that Johnson had betrayed her by speaking out of turn but it marked a turning point in their relationship. Mrs. Clinton several times expressed skepticism about Mrs. Johnson's intentions and Mrs. Johnson, who prided herself on being a hard worker, seemed to withdraw for a while. She did her job but she was not always invested in it the way she had been. Perhaps it should not be surprising that the assistant principal's relationship with teachers sometimes replicated her relationship with her principal. Johnson made several decisions which directly affected teachers with consulting them and then seemed surprised when teachers were upset or felt devalued.

It may seem that Mrs. Clinton overreacted to a minor disagreement but we have to appreciate the context within which she works. Like all Chicago principals, she is on a four-year contract, renewable at the pleasure of her Local School Council. For much of the period under discussion here, relationships between the principal and the LSC were markedly tense. The principal seemed to be right in her judgement that some members were out to get her. At least two members seemed to automatically take the opposite side from her on any issue. There were periods, negotiated by the Comer facilitator when the hostile LSC members tried to be less oppositional but even during those truce periods the principal had a hard time believing they were sincere. She continued to interpret their behavior in the light of their previous behavior, perceiving attacks where we were pretty sure nothing of the sort was intended. The principal was thus always on the defensive, confronted with a central administration that was becoming

increasingly aggressive about insisting on test score improvement and an LSC that seemed to be waiting for her to slip up. The last thing she needed was senior staff openly disagreeing with policy. From the principal's point of view, that kind of betrayal is not merely personal, it jeopardizes her ability to continue to run and improve her school. A principal may firmly believe in collaborative, egalitarian ideals -- Mrs. Clinton brought the Comer program to Woodbine, after all -- and yet bracket them off as not being applicable to particular situations. You can't have everybody expressing their feelings on every single point when you are in the middle of a battle. The principal feels, with some justice, that there have been plenty of issues on which she has gone out of her way to solicit and respond to staff input. She can't do it on every issue.

Her leadership staff would almost certainly agree with her on that. Still, they want to know, more clearly than the principal has communicated in the past, which issues are going to be principal's prerogative and which are open for input. Realistically, thought, principals are themselves going through this reform process for the first time and the political context in which they work is shifting all the time. They cannot always know in advance which issues can comfortably be thrown open for discussion.

However understandable, what is perceived as inconsistent behavior from principals can wreak havoc with their staffs. Soon after the blowup, Mr. Ford, another assistant principal and perhaps the member of the leadership team least likely to disagree with the principal, seemed to become the fairhaired boy. He seemed to have Clinton's confidence in a way the others did not and seemed to have access to information sooner than anybody else. Other members of the team resented what they saw as favoritism and in subsequent meetings when people disagreed

with Mr. Ford it wasn't always clear whether they were disagreeing substantively or just because he was the principal's new boy. At least one other member seemed to be always trying to protect Ford from any criticism. For several months, the atmosphere on the team was defensive and mutually suspicious, enough so that there were open discussions about distrust on the team and enough so that the simplest administrative tasks -- supervising the lunchroom, devising a detention policy -- became exercises in Byzantine intrigue, with each faction trying to discredit the other and always questioning the motives of the other.

In between squabbles over lunchroom duty, this group was supposed to be leading Woodbine school through a thorough-going revision of its curriculum, K through 8. This was a project on which the school had embarked a year and a half earlier, intended to spur more professional collaboration among teachers, to align the material taught in one grade with that taught in contiguous grades while encouraging the use of more innovative teaching methods. It seemed to be largely an idea that the administration was pushing but there was some degree of enthusiasm among staff at the beginning, which rather quickly got frittered away. The external consultant who was brought in got off to a rocky start; teachers initially thought he was talking down to them. From the very start, many, perhaps most, teachers were visibly uncomfortable with the idea of sharing what they were doing in the classroom. The reexamination of curriculum required dozens of meetings, after school and weekends, and even the initially hopeful became resentful. Some teachers made earnest efforts to coordinate with teachers in other grades but many others didn't and some of the latter involved cases of pre-existing friction among teachers. Other disagreements started off as curricular -- including one between a proponent of whole language in the early grades and a proponent of phonics -- but

came to take on a personal caste as well, preventing any rational search for compromise. I suspect that when the administration failed to react forcefully to these problems, they sent a message to teachers about just how serious they were. In any case, most teachers seemed to find the whole process pretty abusive (but even so, it was clear that they learned a great deal about what their colleagues were doing; for all the problems, it was a new level of professional dialogue). The fruit of their mighty labor was a sizeable new curriculum handbook, completed just about when the long-festering leadership tensions were coming to a boil. The administrators acted as if the handbook were a great victory; teachers generally shrugged.

With or without a handbook, school leadership was far too fractured to actually implement anything in the classroom. Mrs. Johnson was probably the staff member with the most pertinent expertise, but the project was assigned to one of the assistants with whom Johnson was frequently at odds. Johnson clearly knew about some of the problems while they were developing but, given her tenuous relationship with the principal and some of her colleagues, did not feel comfortable about raising issues too forcefully. Nevertheless, raise them she did, and, as she expected, her questions were interpreted as personal attacks and the other assistant countered with a series of optimistic reports that glossed over reality. Eventually, Mrs. Johnson was given more direct responsibility for the project but teachers' attitudes were pretty well hardened by that time. They didn't want to hear the phrase "curriculum revision." The very idea of visiting someone else's classrooms was still commonly referred to as "spying." Eight or nine months after the handbook was produced, it appeared that not many teachers could have found a copy of it, much less were they teaching it. With reasonable leadership, the process might have had a chance; other schools got a good deal more out of the process.

At Woodbine, the fragile social situation made it impossible for the school to use expertise it actually had on staff. It is almost certain that the whole episode deepened teacher cynicism about large-scale change. Pity the next person who tries to sell this group on a new academic program, no matter how valuable.

Curricular revision is one of the most complicated tasks any school can undertake. Naturally, it requires building-level leadership. It is perhaps even more instructive that when Woodbine School attempts more modest initiatives, they too frequently flounder on the social infrastructure.

Consider a teacher-initiated attempt to address discipline problems. Teachers had long complained that central office didn't do enough to help them with misbehaving students. Largely at the urging of Mr. Steele, a white fifth-grade teacher, the middle-grade teachers initiated their own discipline policy. Each transgression earned students a certain number of points and as points added up, so did sanctions --calls to parents, detention, loss of in-class privileges and so on. Maybe it wasn't the most creative response but it worked. There was apparently unanimous agreement that so long as all teachers were doing it, and kids faced the same rules and punishments in every classroom, it made a real difference. Classrooms and corridors were noticeably more quiet, referrals to the office were reduced. Most of the changes occurred pretty rapidly but even the most chronic offenders seemed to improve after a couple of marking periods.

So, teachers had collectively identified a problem of vital importance to them, collaborated and had came up with a way to substantially alleviate the problem. Naturally, it didn't last. It is hard to say exactly when things started falling apart but it was clear that by the

end of the first year, there was less consistency of effort. Mr. Steele, the person most visibly associated with the project, lost some leverage after getting involved in a conflict with the administration that took on a personal tone -- such as Steele referring to the main office as "the lunatics." At least one teacher pretty much decided to stop doing the point system. By the beginning of the next year, there were two nonconformants, one of whom went so far as to badmouth to kids the teachers who were enforcing the rules. Her colleagues thought she was trying to win a popularity contest with the kids. Some thought was given to asking the administration to intercede and get everybody back on the same page but the teachers decided that there was no purpose in that. Their thinking may have been affected by the fact that one of the nonconformants was widely perceived to be among the principal's pets. The program just kind of withered away, as teachers gradually tired of beating their heads against the wall. Midway through the second year, only a few classrooms were even trying.

We can't be entirely certain what was happening at the level of individual motivation, but outwardly we seem to have an inability to sustain minimally cooperative relationships, even when all involved seemed to have been profiting from them, an apparent absence of professional respect and of confidence in the ability of the administration to behave impartially. Teachers can craft a small victory but holding on to it takes more social capital than they have.

It would be an error to think of these problems as merely incidental. If only this particular teacher didn't get into a spitting match with this particular principal maybe things would have worked out. In fact, the likelihood is that if that hadn't happened, something else would have. In the inner city, it is misleading to think of hostility as merely interpersonal. Analytically, it becomes structural. Put underprepared people in a highly stressful,

underresourced, stigmatized environment where no one typically has the authority to invoke effective sanctions, where class and racial tensions are everpresent and you create an environment where dysfunctional relationships become as much a part of the social landscape as outmoded textbooks.

Remember that Woodbine School is emphatically not among the worst schools in Chicago. In the worst schools, you wouldn't have a principal giving conflicting messages; you might have an out-and-out autocrat who may runs the school with some little in-group, whose members are distinguished only by their skill at political intrigue or ardor at butt-kissing or who just happen to be on the same racial group as the principals. Teachers elsewhere can be so intimidated that it is difficult to get them to talk inside the building; we call them "parking lot schools" because that's where we have to do our interviews. For all the problems, Mrs. Clinton has, her staff almost universally acknowledges her desire to see children learn and her willingness to select staff on the basis of professional competence. She flies off the handle but she will listen to criticism when she comes down. Maybe Woodbine could not implement the new curriculum policy but in other schools it would have been impossible to get teachers working cooperatively long enough to rewrite the curriculum. For all their problems, the hardworking staff at Woodbine has tests scores on the rise. The tragedy of Woodbine is that with a staff has decidedly has not given up, they still can't sustain a level of internal cooperation that will allow them to predictably keep even simple positive innovations in place, even when the staff have ownership over the innovations.

With a variation here or there, what we see at Woodbine -- distrust and a lack of confidence in one's colleagues undermining reform efforts -- is being acted out across the city.

One of the recent studies from the Consortium on Chicago School Research uses a survey of teachers at 210 schools in an attempt to identify those characteristics shared by schools which are getting better. [3] When the 30 highest-rated schools were compared to the 30 worst, a 13 - item battery of questions about quality of relationships proved to be one of the best separators. Teachers almost unanimously agreed that relationships with their colleagues were cordial but that did not mean there was much respect or trust among them. Forty percent of teachers disagreed with the statement "Teachers in this school trust each other." How teachers in a given school felt about that correlated very well with whether the school was improving or stagnating.

> Social trust is a highly significant factor. In fact, it may well be that social trust is the key factor associated with improving schools. Teachers in the top 30 schools generally sense a great deal of respect from other teachers, indicating that they respect other teachers who take the lead in school improvement efforts and feel comfortable expressing their worries and concerns with colleagues. In contrast, in the bottom 30 schools, teachers explicitly state that they do not trust each other. They believe that only half of the teachers in the school really care about each other and they perceive limited respect from their colleagues.

There were similar patterns in terms of teacher-parent trust:

> In the bottom 30 schools...., teachers perceive much less respect from parents and report that only about half of their colleagues really care about the local

community and feel supported by parents (Both quotes from Sebring, Bryk and Easton 1995, p. 61).

What proportion of inner-city schools would have the kind of damaged social infrastructure the bottom 30 schools here have? ' That is a difficult question to answer just for Chicago, let alone for the country as a whole. Chicago may or may not deserve the label then-Secretary of Education William Bennett hung on it, the label of "worst schools in America," but there are data enough to suggest that even if compared only to other big city school systems, Chicago is a poorly-performing system (Vander Weele 1994, p. 7-9). We have to be cautious, then , about using Chicago as a base for generalizing. Nonetheless, the nation's third-largest school system is important in its own right.

The various reports from the Consortium on Chicago School Research are suggestive. One claims that after three full years of reform 39% to 46 % of the city's schools were characterized by a consolidation of power in the principal's hands (whether through an autocratic style or a paternal/maternal style), the inability of parents or community members to challenge that power and the inability of teachers to sustain collective action on their own behalf. Another 4 % to 9 % are seen as being dominated by adversial politics; no one has control and parents, community members and teachers tend to be factionalized (Bryk, Easton, Kerbow, Rollow and Sebring, 1993). If we collapse the two together, we might say that 43% to 55 % of the schools have the kind of internal power structures likely to be associated distrustful, suspicious relationships, trust being a luxury the powerless cannot easily afford. On the other hand, having power concentrated in the principal's hands doesn't have to suggest a broader demoralization.

Principal autocracy, especially in its maternal/paternal guises, can be viewed as legitimate and parents and teachers may not challenge it because they see no need to. [5] Still, it's probably a very safe bet that inner city schools see the harsher face of autocracy far more often than the softer face.

Another indirect basis for an estimate is provided by what teachers say about how they are experiencing school reform. While many hold their principals in high regard, about 26 % do not share that feeling partly because they don't see their principal as facilitating broad involvement in school affairs. (Sebring, Bryk and Easton, 1995) More tellingly, 42 % see themselves as having only limited or minimal influence in school affairs. "A key difference for these teachers is that they do not feel comfortable voicing their concerns in the school." (p. 17). Another important reflection of the quality of relationships in a building is the degree to which teachers feel responsible for helping one another do their best. Less than half the teachers in the city are willing to say that most of their colleagues do that. That is, if we look at how much voice teachers feel they have, at how safe they feel speaking their minds, how confident they are that colleagues will help them live up to their best standards, negative responses constitute at least 40% of the totals, a sizeable proportion. We also have good reason to think that minimally 40% of schools are either autocratic or adversial. With due regard for the difficulties inherent in jumping from a discussion of individuals to one of schools, it might be reasonable to suppose, given the magnitude of the numbers, that at least a quarter to a third of the city's schools have staffs who routinely find it difficult to trust one another. [6]

The on-going research of the Consortium on Chicago School Research will eventually give us better estimates of the proportion of Chicago schools with demoralized staffs but in the

meantime, I think we can assume the number will turn out to be significant. I noted earlier that generations of ethnographers have given us a very detailed portrait of how demoralization works itself out but that it continues to be the case that much educational policy gets devised and "implemented" as if the work did not exist. What difference does that make? What would change if either those who shape educational policy or those who have to implement it thought more seriously about the role of day-to-day relationships?

For one thing, if policymakers , whether of the ideological left or the ideological right, appreciated the social demoralization of schools they would be less confident that structural change in and of itself means real change. As a report from the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research puts it:

> Our research suggests that human resources -- such as openness to improvement, trust and respect, teachers having knowledge and skills, supportive leadership and socialization -- are more critical to the development of professional community than structural conditions.
>
> Structural conditions -- including time to meet and talk, physical proximity, interdependent teaching roles, communication structures and teacher empowerment -- are important to be sure. But if a school lacks the social and human resources to make use of those structural conditions, it's unlikely that a strong professional community can develop.
>
> This finding adds weight to the argument that the structural elements of restructuring have received too much emphasis in many reform proposals, while

the need to improve the culture, climate and interpersonal relationships in schools have received too little attention. (Kruse, Seashore and Bryk, 1995. p.8)

The structural is seductive with its apparent solidity. The politician who advocates changing schools through changing curriculum or standards or the nature of school governance sounds as if he or she is saying something. It is hard even to imagine a political discourse around the problematics of human relationships in schools.

In the late 1980s, for example, there was widespread confidence among researchers and educational activists that changing governance structures, decentralizing, democratizing, empowering everybody that walked past a school, would lead to meaningful improvement. According to one estimate, at least a third of the school districts in the country tried some form of site-based management between 1986 and 1990 (David, 1995). After fifteen or more years of experimentation, it is clear that while there is a relationship between changing structures of building level power and improving education, it is not necessarily a direct or reliable one. (Conley, 1991; Malen, Ogawa & Kranz, 1992; Weiss, Cambone & Wyeth, 1992; Weiss, 1993; Wohlstetter and Mohrman, 1994; Ross and Webb, 1995; Weiss, 1995).

Take Chicago as a case in point. Part of the rationale for school reform in Chicago was that by empowering parents we could create more accountable schools. Thus, the reform law gives parents six out of the 11 seats on each local school council, including the chair. Does changing the formal structure of power change the reality? If one remembers that in at least 40% of the city's schools, principals have consolidated power in their hands (Bryk, Easton, Kerbow, Rollow and Sebring, 1993) the answer is obviously not. Principals who have learned

to adjust to the new situation are probably more powerful now than they were before parents were formally empowered. [7] Parents have a numerical majority on the councils, but in fact parent members are probably the members who are least likely to come to meetings, if they come, they are the least likely to participate (Easton and Storey, 1994) and if they participate, there is a substantial likelihood that the professionals on the council will pointedly ignore them.

There seem to be several reasons for the fact that parent participation is frequently ineffective including their fear that teachers will take reprisals against children if they play too aggressive a role, the poor technical training that LSC members received, the tendency of poor people to defer to the judgment of the educated and the ability of principals to manipulate parents through a variety of strategies. [8] It is probably fair to say that in several respects, parents do not have the social capital, including the self-confidence, to take full advantage of the formal change in the arrangement of power.

Another contemporary example is the current Best Practices movement (e.g. Zemelman, 1993), based on the straightforward idea that there are certain educational practices which are demonstrably superior to others and if research can identify them and make those ideas available to people in schools, they can lead to dramatic changes in educational outcomes. Perhaps it is a little too straightforward for the real world. Most of the discussion I've seen of Best Practices, including Chicago's attempt to systematize their use (Department of Research, Evaluation and Planning, 1994) pays little attention to social context. At the extremes, that means taking a teaching methodology from, say, New York's Central Park East --that is, a situation where the initial faculty was highly skilled, shared a common educational vision and had a personal and political commitment to its success -- and trying to export it to the normal ghetto school -- that

is, a situation where staff are of dubious competence, alienated, distrustful of one another and largely convinced that it's already too late for most of their children. That is to say, the Best Practices movement lends itself to decontextualized thinking, reducing the problem of urban schooling to a cognitive one -- If only our teachers knew how they do it in Podunk.

To make the same point with a slightly different emphasis, if we took the demoralized state of schools more seriously, we would expect somewhat less attention on programmatic content and more on the mode of implementation. The never-dying debate between proponents of constructivist, open-ended, inquiry-based pedagogy and those of traditional, skills-centered, teacher-driven pedagogy is one obvious case (Delpit, 1988, Gibboney, 1994). With few exceptions, the debate is being waged in the abstract. Which way is better? That's a poor question. A better would be, In demoralized social environments, what is required to implement either model well? What has to be in place at the building level to give either model a chance?

Consider the various "systemic initiatives" that the National Science Foundation has been advocating since 1991 (West, 1994; Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1995. A word of caution here: Anytime anyone in this discourse invokes the magic word "systemic," we should gesture as if to ward off evil. If the word means anything in these conversations, it seems to mean "Let's pretend to do on a grand scale what we have no idea how to do on a small scale.") NSF's Statewide Systemic Initiative and their associated Urban Systemic Initiative aim at nothing less than a complete overhaul of math and science teaching in this country, an overhaul that will not leave poor and minority children behind. To do that they want to invoke higher standards for learning and assessment, align state and local policies concerning finance, curriculum , teacher preparation and development in support of these higher standards, develop

and provide teachers with materials that will support their use of innovative, inquiry-based curriculum. The Georgia SSI, for example, intends to produce "creative problem solvers, critical thinkers, questioners, experimenters, innovators, effective communicators, and reflective learners." (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1995, p. 4).

Heaven knows these are entirely laudable aims but how are all the sensible-sounding plans likely to play when they reach, say, inner city Atlanta? I don't get a sense that NSF thought very much about that but it does not take a rocket scientist to predict that in a certain number of schools the principal, well aware that any new program can be disruptive, will put a "safe" person in charge, which, all by itself, can cause the program to lose legitimacy with the rest of the faculty. Almost inevitably, in some schools, teachers who are firmly convinced that their children will never learn the times tables are going to reject the fancy new teaching procedures out of hand. If someone makes them go through the motions, they will, but no more than that. The main mechanism for actually bringing the program into a building is a design team, the members of which are supposed to represent all the teachers in a building concerned with math or science education. These teams are going to have all the problems other supposedly democratic committees have in demoralized environments. If staffs are sufficiently factionalized, the level of individualism sufficiently high, it may not be possible for any teacher to "represent" other teachers or to meaningfully communicate new ideas to them. If nothing else, some of the teachers are going to be Black, some of the curriculum experts are going to be white and some of those Black teachers have heard enough white experts on Black children to last them this lifetime and the next. The moment the "experts" start to pontificate, the teachers will shut down.

NSF seems to be proceeding as if they were designing programs to be implemented by more or less rational organizations and individuals. If we assume that we are implementing programs in environments where behavior is often irrational, even self-destructive, we would proceed differently. That might mean thinking in advance about mechanisms to prevent local decision-makers from exerting unhealthy influences, about mechanisms for insuring that appropriate in-building communication does in fact occur. It might mean that we would simply never have programs where teachers are "retrained" and then left to implement on their own. The military talks about having equipment "ruggedized" for the field; the issue is not whether the computer works but whether it has been built to work under the actual conditions of combat, in extreme heat or extreme cold or in the middle of a storm at sea. We could ask the same question of our pet programs. How can we ruggedize them so that whatever they offer of value can survive the actual conditions of inner city schools?

Part of the answer is that we can be wary about allowing programs to grow too fast. We are all anxious for change but given the record of large-scale failures in the past, NSF might have been better off trying to have a real impact in one city before it went nationwide. Being "systemic" at the local level is challenge enough right now. In the early years of school reform in Chicago, most of the school reform community, including the foundation community, underestimated the difficulty of the work to be done. Foundations were saying they wanted some bang for their buck. The more schools you had in your program, the happier the foundations were. Dr. Comer wanted to start off in Chicago with just two schools. Local foundations wanted him to start in 16. The compromise reached was that the program started with four schools the first year and added four more the second year, which in retrospect was

perfectly ridiculous. They were moving into new schools before they completely had a handle on what was going on in their old ones. In a good many schools, the first two or three years of school reform seem to have been largely about clearing away social impediments to change rather than actually implementing this or that program. It may take some schools that long to create a social infrastructure that will give them a chance to start actual implementation.

Ironically, there are reasons to wonder if even the national Comer project isn't growing too rapidly. Begun in the 1960s, the program began growing rapidly in the 1980s. By 1990, at least 100 schools around the country were trying to implement Comer programs; by 1994 it was 300 and 563 by the fall of 1995. (Haynes and Comer 1993, Sommerfeld 1994, Comer, Haynes, Joyner and Ben-Avie, 1996.) At the least, the very pace of growth suggests questions about whether the small national staff can adequately monitor the degree to which individual projects continue to focus on relationships. In the absence of some such monitoring, one would expect the program to become a caricature of itself, with lots of energy going into maintaining the visible structures and many a rhetorical bow in the direction of the program's official philosophy. Similarly, the small schools movement would seem to be largely driven by concern with relationship issues but in practice, at least in Chicago, some principals are simply ordering their staffs to develop small schools, like it or not, a kind of be-personable-or-you're-going-to get-hurt policy.

If policymakers and practitioners are sometimes confused about the salience of the social realities of urban schools -- and I mean specifically the matter of the degree of social trust and mutual confidence within a school-community -- researchers sometimes seem to lose focus on it as well. A recent special issue of Sociology of Education explicitly focused on the

relationship between sociology and educational policy fails to raise the issue with any forcefulness with the exception of two article that, with varying degrees of explicitness, touch on teacher and institutional expectations and racial and class tensions (Dougherty, 1996; Wells and Oakes, 1996). Richard Elmore's much-commented discussion of the problematics of going to scale with good educational practice only obliquely addresses the issues dealt with here.

Doubtless, right now someone somewhere is musing over some ideas that will become the next Grand Vision of urban school reform. We need not know the particulars to know that the critique of existing practice will trenchant, the vision of what could be like if only we do X will be intellectually sound and morally appealing. Let us hope that the people who have to translate the vision into practice will appreciate that our toughest urban schools can be a morass of anger and distrust against which compelling visions and generous intentions have only a marginal chance.

ENDNOTES

1. I am grateful to Michelle Adler, Chicago Comer facilitator, for the title story.

2. In order to protect its anonymity, I have changed some details about "Woodbine" school and its staff.

3. "Getting better" here means schools were doing positive things in terms of inclusive patterns of governance, parental involvement and the development of a sense of professional community among teachers. It does not include any direct measure of student achievement. Note, too, that while "social climate" is a multi-dimensional concept (Anderson, 1982), my sense is that the issue of "trust" cuts right to the heart of what is problematic about the social climate in urban schools. I think of it broadly, though, so that it takes into account not only how people assess one another's intentions but their capacities. Do principals "trust" that their teachers have enough content knowledge to be effective? Do teachers think their children really are capable of learning? It might be clearer to say that I think the central issues are ones of both trust and confidence.

4. Of course, while these problems may find particularly sharp expression in the cities, they exist in less urbanized areas as well. One study of the slow pace of school reform in the Southeast concluded that the major barriers included the instability of leadership, the start and stop nature of reforms, the inability to reach consensus on goals, under-investment in training and a pervasive lack of trust, all breeding cynicism and a "them against us"mentality (SERVE,

1994). See also Mickelson and Wadsworth, (forthcoming).

5. The study (pp. 8-9) includes another category, "maintenance politics" for schools where stakeholders are complacent and there is little substantive discussion of change. These are estimated to make up 14 to 24 % of all schools. Some of these are likely to be schools with severe relationship issues but the category is so broadly defined that we cannot be certain.

6.Two caveats: First, having been in schools when teachers were filling out questionnaires, I think their responses are sometimes characterized by a "happy talk" syndrome. That is, they tend to accent the positive. Secondly, on the issue of how inclusive principals are I would guess that teachers in general have sufficiently low standards after decades of brow-beating principals dominating the system that it does not take much to impress them.

7. At least this was true until a 1995 revision of the reform legislation gave the Mayor of Chicago significantly enhanced powers vis-a-vis the school system. Chicago now has a system that is simultaneously decentralized and recentralized.

8. Despite the poor functioning of some of them, the LSC's have made Chicago schools far more open and innovative than they used to be. Their very existence means that principals want to be able to point to visible achievements at the end of their four-year contracts.

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Institute for Policy Research
Northwestern University
2040 Sheridan Road
Evanston, IL 60208-4100
Phone: 847-491-3395
Fax: 847-491-9916

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